



Neil Phillips: Poverty, Boys of Color, and Celebrating Small Victories In Our Schools

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:04

Hi, Neil, how are you? I'm doing well, Maureen, thank you. How are you? I'm doing well, too. Thanks. And thank you for joining us in the summit. We are really excited to be coming together to see how we can move education forward and make it the best possible for all of our kids. So combining resources is super important. Yeah, well, I really appreciate your including me and being involved. And I just love the spirit of this occasion, this event, and I'm very happy to participate. So thank you. Yes. Neil, would you tell us a bit about who you are, and who you've been working with; what you do? Yeah, wow. Is there a time limit on this response? The who I am: who I am is the very fortunate husband to my wonderful wife, Shannon R. Phillips; and the very fortunate father to my two boys, Reece and Blair, who are 16 and 13, respectively. My family, my immediate family and my extended family, mean everything to me. So I strive to try to be the best husband, father, brother, uncle, son I can be. So that's first and foremost.

Neil Phillips 01:24

Beyond that, I am someone who really believes in the value and worthiness of every human being. I am a human value addict. And that sentiment, that conviction about everyone's inherent human worth, really drives not just what I do, but how I do it. And that work has manifest in many, many different ways over the years, personally and professionally. I mean I grew up as an athlete, and was a college athlete and professional athlete. And so sports, particularly team sports had been a big part of my life. And the theme of what "team" means is always close to whatever it is I'm doing. And I have been a coach, I have been a teacher, I have run divisions at independent schools. I have started a charter school with a group of founding members. I have been a principal of that charter school. And, you know, I have had an ongoing book project for years and years, and I have worked with organizations and companies around their diversity, interests, and how they celebrate human value and equity within their organizations. And I am constantly in search of where and how I can be most beneficial. Where I can help most and where I can learn most, and apply sort of my ongoing discoveries and heightened awareness and perspectives and try to apply those for good. So I'm sure there's a lot more I could say, but I'll stop there.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 03:49

No, that's amazing, and the breadth and the diversity. And I really appreciate the charter school that you created and then we're the founding director of, you were really walking your talk and seeing the value. I'd love to have you explain who you served and talk about the storytelling aspect because I think our culture doesn't do as good a job of story as many others do.



Neil Phillips 04:18

Yeah, I appreciate you asking about that. So the school we started, so a group of four founders of which I was one and my wife was the second, we started an all-boys school called Visible Men Academy, and it's in Bradenton, Florida. I live in Sarasota, Florida, a neighboring town. In Bradenton, Florida. The school was launched in the fall of 2013. So coming up on completing its eighth school year. It is, you know, we've averaged about 100 students, kindergarten through fifth grade. Our initial charter was kindergarten through eighth grade. And we started K-2 and started adding grades each year and got up to a sixth grade; and then at that point, we recognized that, given our size, our current enrollment, our future enrollment targets, we recognized that it would be best for us to focus on the elementary grades, and really tie ourselves and commit ourselves to the notion of trajectory, recognizing that middle school is a very different landscape and requires different and more resources to be able to deliver the kind of middle school experience that we felt our boys needed. So at that point, we committed to being K-5. We partnered with an agency to actually run a pre-k class. So we've got some really young boys running around on campus who are just amazing. You should watch the kindergarteners all of a sudden feel like you know, big men on campus when they look over and see the threes and the fours. But, you know, Visible Men Academy existed from day one, and still exists to tell a very different story of the prospects for boys of color, primarily, not exclusively, but primarily Boys of Color, primarily Black boys, but we have a significant Latino population, and White boys and Asian boys as well. But the commonality of our student body and student population is poverty. And when you look statistically across the country, historically, you see that this segment is always standing out unfavorably in the positive areas of school success. And we know that these boys are capable of much more than they have been shot. And we know that they have been saddled in environments that expect far too little of them. And our convictions and expectations drive behavior. And we elevated our expectations, and we didn't shy away from the word love; use that word very often because we don't see any other, any other path. That's the path through which all of this growth and the accomplishment can happen. And we've just seen amazing things with our boys. We have an incredible team of teachers and volunteers and administrators who just do an amazing job with these boys. And, you know, the school is heavily rooted in character development, prioritizing the significance of developing strong character. And not as something independent of academic growth and skill proficiency in reading, math, and every other content area, but as something that's a part of those things. That strong character is the foundation of what's going to contribute to increase reading proficiency, to a child's ability to respond to intense remediation. Strong character is at the heart of it, and those of us as adults who have met with success by any measure to beyond our school years, if asked, "What contributed most to that success?" we would cite things like perseverance, resilience, work ethic, team attitude, achievement attitude. We know that those are the key yet when we look at, you know, our traditional educational environments, we don't prioritize the teaching of those things, the deliberate teaching of those things. And we recognize how important academic diligence is, and great curriculum, and teaching technique; all those things



are really, really important. And we believe that there needs to be an emphasis on, a deliberate emphasis on, what character development looks like. So VMA is just a place that's near and dear to my heart. I, as I mentioned, was part of the founding team. But I resigned from my position from the school back in February. And I'm looking forward to continuing to support and encourage the VMA school community in any way I can so that it continues to thrive and grow and serve our boys and our families in all the ways that that we set out eight years ago.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 09:54

Absolutely. You're such a change activator and this whole summit is about activism. And really we do know graduation rates, everything, students of color, students of low income: the numbers are not what they need to be; they're worse than, and they're bad for everybody. But that you're saying, "Hey, we're going to be really intentional about the whole child and about the character development" is really important. And changing stories, having kids hear different messages from perhaps media and and the larger world. I know you're also working on a digital platform that ties into that? Yeah, that's absolutely right. I mean, one of the things that that is really clear to us is, you know, that, you mentioned that the importance of stories. And you know, it's common for all of us to use the term "role models" and we talked about that, and we mentioned it, and it's really important. But if we really think about what that means, right? The term that I use around this is "success imagery," right? We need all of our children to be immersed in images of what success and accomplishment and achievement look like. And what they look like in a professional realm, what they look like in a community realm, and especially what those things look like within the family, right? What does it mean to be a capable, you know, brother, a loving, you know, son, and those things. And the best, and to us the most sticky, way that that happens is through story and imagery, right? Showing, in our case our boys, what that looks like.

Neil Phillips 11:46

And the best messengers for these messages are the men who have lived these lives, and who are living these lives. And sadly, you know, the default imagery of men of color in so many instances, you just get inundated with the negative stories about, you know, failure to graduate from high school, and the cycle of futility that then leads to well, if you don't have a high school degree, it's gonna be hard to get a job. And so it's unemployment. And if you're not employed, it's more tempting to find ways to earn money that's outside the law and so you do that. And so now crime and incarceration and recidivism, and so here's this cycle. And of course, we need to pay attention to that, and we need to talk about that. But if we do that, without talking about the other side of the statistics, right? What does it look like to graduate from high school and to go on to earn a degree? Or if you choose not to go on to college, but you take a trade route, and you get a job, and you're able to provide for your family? And you know, just what are the other side is, the statistics that reveal this accomplishment and this achievement and this family contribution, community contribution, we have to tell that story as well, because it's very real. And highlighting those stories of these everyday heroes and making them visible. That's the



original premise of Visible Men: is telling the untold story and putting those stories around our boys, in our case, but all of our young people, so that they can see and feel what it actually looks like, so that they have this imagery, and connection to future possibility.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 11:46

I love that. And listeners, I would love to have you type into the chat: What are some images you want to be in the minds of our youth? What, I know kids are like, "Oh, they're glued to their screens, they're this or that;" no, do the flip. What are those images you want them to see? Be thinking about that so when we go to the live chat, you can add into this conversation. So Neil, if you could work with, you know, all the people at the summit and beyond, and if you could nudge even just one step of activism, where we're really focusing on the positive, the stories, the character, and helping students see their potential; can you think of a way that you would want to nudge people or a step you could recommend where they could start? Sure. Ah, you know, it's a great question, because I think there are many different elements to a comprehensive response there. But one of the things that I would say, you know, we hear so much in middle-income and upper-income environments: it's sort of "every kid gets trophy" culture. And you know, people, you know, the adults are lamenting, say, "Oh my gosh, you know, all you got to do is sign up and you get the trophy." And these kids are, you know, getting in this mindset that you don't have to do anything special to just, you know, what's this "every kid gets a trophy" environment all about? Well, you know, it's my belief that there are some environments where kids need more trophies. Kids need more trophies. And when you talk about communities that have in some ways been neglected or underserved, or sort of hamstrung by low expectations, the idea that more trophies need to be handed out is something I believe in. And the reason being is because I think what's really critical in these environments is small victories. Our kids need to be in the habit of identifying and celebrating small victories of progress, right.

Neil Phillips 16:17

When Visible Men Academy first undertook the state testing, it was FCAT at the time, we earned a failing school grade. And in many ways, it wasn't surprising. We knew the task at hand and the challenges ahead, but of course it was jarring. But we knew that we were seeing progress: we were seeing progress through classroom work, through our quarterly diagnostic testing. And we were seeing this progress. And we tried to make a big deal out of that incremental growth, because we knew that our boys needed to see and feel their hard work, their commitment, that of their teachers and their parents, paying off. And even if the final score in that particular year wasn't what we wanted it to be, we knew we needed to harp on those progress points. And sure enough, our following year, we earned a C grade. And our following year after that, we earned an A grade. And so it's this idea of having young people feel success. And sometimes if you wait for that to be some culminating marker, you haven't built up that attachment to those progress points of success. So those small victories and handing out trophies, even before the finals, in some environments, I think is absolutely critical. And so I know that there's such a



realm, such a range and spectrum, of the types of schools, and the types of school communities, and student populations that listeners and summit participants represent. But as a broad theme about these small victories and periodic victories, I think that can be applicable in many, many different school settings.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 18:24

I completely agree. And we help kids break down big projects so that they're manageable. And so for us to not just expect the outcome but to break down celebrating the successes along the way, we can be doing that as parents, as educators, as employers, that would, that makes really good sense. So that there is this attachment, and there is this progress, because we know so many of our youth have, like anxiety, depression. So if we can help celebrate, then they don't feel this huge failure and like, "Oh, maybe I'm doing okay," or "Maybe I can try a little more now." So we're actually giving them hope and encouragement so that they can really be their best selves.

Neil Phillips 19:04

Yeah, that's well-put in, you know, the last thing I'll say about that: there was a real key, I think absolutely essential element in the two years that we had grown two letter grades on that final state testing. And that element was that our students started to own and be able to articulate their own progress, right? So yes, it was teacher saying "This is where you are, this is how many you got right, this is how many you missed, these are the areas we have to focus on. But then I started to be able to walk around campus and I would encounter one of our sons, we called our students sons S U N S, and I'd say, "So how's it going?" And, you know, Hector, or you know, Marcus, or any one of the boys would rattle off some score from Fountas and Pinnell, or from My Ready or whatever it is, and just literally tell me to the number, what they just got and what that meant for their progress. And we're talking about fourth and fifth graders and third graders, and their ability to articulate, that was a real turning point for us. And if you want that kind of thing to happen, you want them to embrace their progress, you've got to point that progress out to them along the way. Otherwise, you know, which, who among us wants to just dwell on all of the setbacks and disappointments in our life and want to tell stories about that? That's a really hard thing to do. So, a lot of benefits to this idea of celebrating small victories.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 20:42

Yeah. So if you had a magic wand to just really transform education for our elementary, for our boys, for our boys of color, low income; what would you wish, what have you learned that you wish were happening across the board?

Neil Phillips 21:06

Yeah, so I love that question. So two things I've already mentioned: the first is love. We have to stop shying away from using that word and from you know, saying that that is our driver, that is our mechanism to elevate, is that we love you. Right? Because when young people, well any of



us but young people in particular, feel loved, now you can build a pipeline as an adult in their lives, as a teacher, as an educator, as a mentor. And it's through that pipeline, that the two-way exchange of information and growth and development happens. In the absence of that pipeline, you can't get that, no matter what curriculum you have, no matter what technology you have, that pipeline is everything. And love is really what, what, what, what establishes that and sustains it. That's one thing. Another thing is: when you look at young people who have encountered the challenges of poverty, the day-to-day challenges that present themselves in impoverished communities, what you will be quick to see is that they, through difficult circumstances, are forced to develop these unbelievably virtuous traits, resilience and toughness, creativity, you know, giving. I mean, I looked at some of our elementary-age boys who I knew were leaving our school, to go home, to be the man of the house, for their younger siblings for three hours or four hours until mom, or aunt, or grandpa, or uncle could come home. I mean, these traits are just they're the very things we cite as reasons for successful CEOs, or entrepreneurs, right? We attribute their success to these traits that these kids are developing out of necessity at very young ages. So if we took an asset-based perspective on that, and said, "The circumstances that are causing these kids to have to develop these traits at an accelerated rate, those are unfortunate. And we would love it for those circumstances to not be there." But given that they are, what if we looked at these traits as assets? And so if we did, and when we do, then it will cause us to elevate expectations. We'll say that these kids will be successful, not in spite of who they are, but because of who they are. And when we make that mindset flip, not in spite, but because of, it will change everything we do about how we view our responsibility as educators, the types of school environments in which they can thrive, right? Saying to ourselves, "They may not demonstrate proficiency, or much capability in this particular area in this particular way of assessing it," but it's incumbent upon us to think of the creative ways that we can find their skills, their attributes, the proficiency that they exhibit in really, really important sort of life ways. Wow. Those are kids who will demonstrate their ability to succeed and will reveal their high potential and will ultimately reach it. So it's a mindset change. And I think that that onus is on us as the educators, as educational entrepreneurs, as the policymakers, as donors and funders and philanthropists, is that that's on us. These kids have a brilliance to them and they bring that brilliance every single day. And it's our job to create an environment where that can be manifest.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 25:25

Agreed. Wow, Neil, thank you and listeners, we are going to hop over to the live chat so that we can interact. So at the bottom, you'll see you can just click and get moved over to the Facebook group. And Neil will be able to answer more of your questions, and we'll be able to continue this conversation. Neil, thank you so much. Maureen. It's my pleasure. And thank you very, very much for having me.